New era for World Snooker?

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The World Professional Snooker Championship was first contested in 1927 when it was won by the legendary Joe Davis who held the title a record 15 times, retiring undefeated. His prize money for his first win? £6 10s. Last year, first time winner Neil Robertson picked up a cheque for a cool £250,000 at Sheffield's world famous Crucible Theatre, where it has been contested since 1977. In addition to that, the then twenty-eight year old Australian became only the second player to take the prestigious title out of the British Isles; the first being Canadian-born Cliff Thorburn in 1980.

At close of play last night, Ding Junhui was 3-5 down against Judd Trump. If he can recover from this minimal deficit to overcome his English opponent, he will be one match away from becoming the first non-white and more importantly the first Chinese player to lift the most prestigious title in the game. And if that happens, we will very likely see a veritable explosion in snooker throughout the Orient. China with over a billion citizens and an annual economic growth rate of over 10% is a potentially enormous market for world snooker for a number of reasons.

The game is extremely tightly regulated, boasts an impeccable dress code – jackets and ties always – and does not tolerate any of the at times unsavoury behaviour that has become *de rigueur* for soccer and certain other sports. If Ding takes home the trophy he will receive a hero's welcome from his countrymen, who have already embraced the game big time; by 2008, Beijing alone boasted some three hundred snooker venues.

Then there is the prospect of sponsorship, but more importantly although China has embraced capitalism, its rulers maintain an iron grip on virtually every aspect of Chinese life, and will surely see the potential for reinforcing their social mores with a game that eschews drug taking, binge drinking, partying and other ungentlemanly behaviour in favour of bow ties, handshakes and a custom of players declaring their own fouls. What a contrast with soccer – a gentleman's game played by hooligans. In the 2006 FIFA World Cup, no fewer than 28 players were sent off over the course of the tournament, whereas if one makes an exception for the late Alex (Hurricane) Higgins, who urinated in a pot plant, headbutted a tournament official, and threatened to have fellow Irish professional Dennis Taylor shot, disciplinary hearings are rare indeed in the gentleman's world of the green baize.

Even if Ding progresses no further, six times former World Professional Champion Steve Davis (no relation to Joe), is confident that China's time has come. Three years ago he told BBC Sport:

"The sporting mentality over there has always been to work very hard and if players show promise then they will get support from the government."

Though he failed to qualify for this year's World Championship, Davis commentates regularly for BBC Television, and he will be watching Ding's match closely when it resumes. Him and a hundred million plus Chinese snooker fans.

[The above article was first published April 29, 2011, not April 28 as shown on the archived version. One very minor correction, the first overseas player to win the title was Australian Horace Lindum in 1952.]